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Army Scheming To Seize Power In Argentina

Argentine President Reynaldo Bignone will be overthrown before the month is out.

This, at least, is the prediction contained in a secret Argentine army document, which reveals that the man who is the real power behind Bignone, Army Commander-in-Chief Cristino Nicolaides, intends to seize the presidency as well as the power—and soon.

The document, stamped "Secreto," was translated and confirmed as authentic by my associates Jon Lee Anderson and Dale Van Atta. Dated Aug. 19, it is from Brig. Gen. Rodolfo Enrique Luis Wehner to the army's top intelligence officer, Brig. Gen. Alfredo Sotera, laying out instructions from their "jefe maximo," Gen. Nicolaides.

"The ascension of His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief to the presidency of the nation . . . should be achieved toward the end of this year," the orders state unequivocally.

Ever since Bignone took over the military regime from disgraced Gen. Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri in the aftermath of the disastrous Falkland Islands adventure, there have been repeated rumors that Nicolaides was not satisfied with his behind-the-scenes role. Nicolaides routinely dismissed these rumors as "malicious gossip."

In the secret directive, Wehner reminds Sotera of "the meeting we both had with His Excellency," and alludes to the commander-in-chief's concern about disloyalty within the army high command, some of whom evidently have political ambitions of their own.

It is vital, the intelligence chief is told, that they "impede the rise of internal dissident tendencies which [would] make it impossible for [Nicolaides] to exercise the necessary control" over the army.

A disinformation campaign is called for. Sotera is ordered to "make it known that it is not in the interests of His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief to occupy the presidency of the nation, that this would only occur in case the current government headed by President Reynaldo Bignone doesn't work out."

At the same time, though, "there should be created . . . the sense of a lack of stability, a power vacuum, and increased concern over the development of the social and economic crisis," the document states.

Using the phrase "political decision" for the planned takeover, the secret instructions tell the intelligence chief to contact "pertinent civilian sectors"—that is, politicians chosen by Nicolaides—to make certain "that they go along with the 'political decision,' which will ensure a normal transfer of power."

The orders continue: "At the same time, develop and increase the contacts with the Navy and Air Force High Commands. Let it then be perfectly understood that the thinking of [Nicolaides] is that 'the process' [his presidency] shouldn't go on for longer than the first months of 1984. If a prolongation should occur . . . it would only happen after previous agreement with 'the most representative civilian sectors.' "

In other words, the anticipated suspicions among the other armed forces that Nicolaides plans to keep control indefinitely should be allayed by an assurance that he will give up the presidency in about a year unless civilian leaders agree that he should stay on.

It is possible, of course, that Nicolaides may decide to give up his plans for a coup—or at least his timetable for one—now that I've blown his cover.

"As the Commander-in-Chief ordered," the secret orders state, "the taking of the 'political decision' depends, for the most part, upon the level of confidentiality maintained. For this reason, it is important to take all the precautions necessary to ensure the success of the operation."

Sorry about that, general.

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